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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ABU DHABI 000016

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ARPI, AND NEA/PI

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TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KPAO](#) [KMPI](#) [AE](#)

SUBJECT: UAE REFORM STRATEGY: THIRD QUARTERLY UPDATE

REF: A. ABU DHABI 4113

[B](#). ABU DHABI 2173
[C](#). ABU DHABI 4905
[D](#). ABU DHABI 4909
[E](#). DUBAI 6399
[F](#). STATE 230430
[G](#). ABU DHABI 3043

Classified By: CDA MARTIN R. QUINN, REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

[1](#). (C) Summary: Since the September 30 submission of the quarterly UAE Democratic Reform Strategy update (ref A), there have been several positive developments in our reform strategy (ref B). Most notably, on December 1, President Khalifa announced that a form of limited elections will be held for half of the Federal National Council (FNC), with the other half being appointed by the rulers of the individual emirates as is current practice. President Khalifa described the initiative as a first step in a broader democratization strategy, and said that amendments giving the FNC greater powers and allowing direct elections would follow. The Ministry of Education subsequently announced that democracy will become a required part of both the elementary and secondary curricula beginning with the 2006-07 school year. There has been no tangible progress on the adoption of either an NGO or labor law, and no decision taken on whether to allow a human rights NGO to operate. In the area of media reform, the Journalists Association is close to submitting to the UAEG its recommended revisions to the UAE's Publications and Publishing Law so that it more closely reflects western standards of press freedom.

[2](#). (C) Summary (continued): In the area of improving public sector transparency, Abu Dhabi's National Consultative Council (NCC), which advises the Emirate of Abu Dhabi's Executive Council, launched a web site in October that allows citizens to follow debates and submit suggestions. On a national scale, there are still no formal, transparent mechanisms for the public to comment on draft federal legislation or proposed regulations. In the judicial reform arena, some lawyers and civil activists expressed concern with some of the Government's Federal Penal Code amendments, which they fear could target any political opposition movement. End Summary.

Representative Government

[3](#). (U) On December 1, President Khalifa announced a form of limited elections for the Federal National Council (FNC), which received the full endorsement of the Supreme Council on December 3 (ref C and D). Although precise details of the election have not yet been publicized, the concept would be to have half of the FNC elected by an appointed body of approximately 2000 electors, and the other half appointed by the rulers of the individual emirates. President Khalifa did not give a timetable for the limited elections. Separately, he announced that he would submit a proposal to the FNC during its next session recommending amendments to the UAE constitution. These amendments would give greater power to the FNC, increase the FNC's membership to match the population increase, and lengthen legislative terms. President Khalifa said that the amendments were intended to prepare for direct elections with universal suffrage for UAE nationals. He also stressed that women would participate in the political process, and that he was looking forward to more reforms on various levels of power.

[4](#). (U) As President Khalifa was announcing his reform agenda, the Abu Dhabi Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ADCCI) was gearing up for its first-ever elections for board members. Mohammed Omar Abdullah, director-general of the ADCCI, described the Chamber of Commerce's election as an important step toward building an "electoral culture" in the UAE. In the lead-up to the December 5 election, campaigning by candidates included posters and billboards along Abu Dhabi thoroughfares. Of the board's 21 directors, 15 were elected, including two expatriates, and six (including two women) were appointed by the Abu Dhabi Emirate government. Several hundred Emiratis, both men and women, along with expatriate members of the Chamber of Commerce, voted.

Civil Society Development

15. (U) Following the announcement of FNC elections, on December 5, Dr. Obaid al Muhairi, Director of Education and Curriculum Development at the Ministry Of Education, announced that beginning with the 2006-07 school year, democracy would become part of the UAE national curriculum. Starting in first grade, the definition and principles of democracy would be taught each year, and then in sixth grade, schools would introduce practical skills related to democracy. Dr. Muhairi stated that the Ministry has a curriculum already prepared that includes exercises such as a model parliament and debate skills for secondary school students.

16. (C) There has been no tangible progress on the adoption of either an NGO or labor law, although UAEG officials continue to tell us that the process is moving forward. Similarly, the UAEG has yet to take a decision on whether to allow the establishment of one or more human rights NGOs, although an announcement was imminent, according to a December 11 news article. It is noteworthy, however, that the Dubai Police gave a humanitarian award in December to an activist who runs a women's shelter in Dubai, despite the fact that her organization does not have official recognition (ref E).

17. (U) From November 16-17, the Dubai-based Gulf Research Center and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace co-hosted a workshop on political reforms in Gulf Cooperation Council countries. The participants discussed domestic factors driving the reform process, progress made in different countries, and how the transformation is likely to unfold. Regional and international scholars and experts attended the event, whose overall aim was to propose ideas on how to strengthen civil society organizations in a manner to reinforce the political reform process.

Media Reform

18. (C) The UAE Journalists Association's committee responsible for suggesting revisions to the UAE's Publications and Publishing Law to more closely reflect western standards of press freedom, announced in October that it had completed its study of various proposals and would prepare recommendations for the UAEG in early 2006. A MEPI-funded project brought a U.S. media law expert to Abu Dhabi in November to meet with the Journalists Association. The consultant has since been compiling feedback on the Journalists Association's draft law, which will be provided to the Association (along with other information and recommendations) in a comprehensive report expected next month.

19. (C) On October 9, a Sharjah court finally acquitted two journalists in a 1999 libel case brought against them by Sharjah Municipality. This libel case has long been identified by journalists as a cause for self-censorship since the Publications and Publishing Law of 1980 treats libel and defamation as criminal cases and not civil. The press hailed the ruling as a reinforcement of "freedom of the local media." Self-censorship by foreign journalists fearing loss of work permits and deportation continues.

Transparency

10. (U) UAEG officials involved in the U.S./UAE FTA negotiations continue to issue high-profile press items informing the local populace about progress in the FTA negotiations and assuring the public that the UAEG is taking their concerns into consideration. Prior to the third round of negotiations in November, UAE co-lead negotiator Dr. Mohammad Khalfan bin Khirbash was quoted in all of the Arabic dailies as saying, "we are pro-actively engaged with our Chambers of Commerce, business, professional, and industrial associations and other private sector representative bodies to find a common position on which we base our negotiations."

11. (U) The Emirate of Abu Dhabi's National Consultative Council, which advises the Abu Dhabi Executive Council, launched a web site October 1 that allows anyone to follow Council debates and to submit complaints, suggestions, and petitions directly to the NCC members. Each NCC member has an e-mail address published on the site, and the web site offers a bulletin board and live chat room where visitors can view NCC debates live. Rashid Salem al Nuaimi, the NCC's Deputy Secretary General, billed the web site an "educational instrument" for students and citizens to learn about Abu Dhabi government.

12. (U) In his National Day speech, President Khalifa stated

that one of his priorities in 2006 would be to improve government accountability and transparency, but he did not provide specifics.

Justice Reform

13. (C) The issuance of Federal Law No. 34 for 2005 amending a range of articles in the Federal Penal Code caused some concern among some lawyers and social activists. In particular, they focused on amendments to Article 180, which provides for imprisonment of any person who sets up a society, organization or group with the intention of overthrowing the government, obstructing the constitution or laws, undermining the pillars of government, or jeopardizing national unity or social peace. While the intention may be to close loopholes regarding terrorists and extremist organizations, some lawyers and social activists found the language "overly broad," with one Embassy contact suggesting that the new law could be used to silence any group, civil association, or organization that criticizes the government or which calls for social change. The new law did not go through the normal ratification process beginning with consultation with the FNC, but was issued by President Khalifa and ratified by the Supreme Council in the FNC's absence.

Other Reform Developments

14. (U) The following are some of the other reform-related developments that occurred during the last quarter of 2005:

-- On November 14, the UAE Federal Cabinet ratified the UN Anti-Corruption Convention. The measure went into effect on December 15, 2005.

-- On December 13 the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) country office in the UAE hosted a training workshop for 25 local journalists to discuss the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). Participants at the workshop discussed the media's role in raising awareness among decision makers, the private sector, and civil society and in advocating for developing national plans and committing necessary resources towards achieving the MDGs. Among the speakers was a representative from the UAE Ministry of Economy and Planning.

-- In December, the UAE Ministry of Labor announced that it will form a Supreme Labor Committee that will provide a venue for the private sector to discuss labor market problems with appropriate UAEG and emirate-level officials. The Ministry of Labor is expected to consult with the group on upcoming decisions and policies -- possibly including anticipated revisions to the UAE labor law.

MEPI Programming Ideas

15. (C) Post endorses Department suggestions to pursue UAE components of the Arab Civitas, ICNL, and Rule of Law programs (ref F). We will identify and contact appropriate interlocutors to seek the UAE's inclusion in these projects, and will respond septel to programs gaps noted.

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